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# Can Brazil Lead? The Breakdown of Brazilian Foreign Policy and What it Means for the Region

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## Abstract

For the last 20 years Brazil pursued an activist foreign policy both in relation to its own region and the wider world. Yet, in recent years, many Brazil's initiatives have stalled or collapsed. The argument put forward is that this inertia is largely due to the almost total absence of Brazilian political leadership, especially in South America. Yet, such leadership is urgently needed in the face of multiple regional and international challenges, with the political and economic crisis serving here as an illustrative case study. Particular attention here will also be paid to the role of UNASUR in this crisis.

Using the conceptual framework of Complexity and Human System Dynamics (HSD), it will be argued that Brazil cannot assume the leadership role that is needed because its foreign policy is marked by a lack of overarching objective, muddled foreign policy execution and a lack of clear channels through which to formulate such a coherent policy which has the chance to achieve its strategic objectives. The article will propose ways for Brazil to redefine its foreign policy approach and objectives to become the dynamic leader the region needs.

## Keywords

Brazil, Venezuela, Leadership, Crisis, Complexity, Human System Dynamics

## Introduction

Brazil is South America's dominant country. It is by far the biggest in terms of territory and population, has the biggest economy in the region and sits on an enormous pool of natural resources. Yet, for most of its history Brazil was not a 'natural' leader, its foreign policy being focussed principally on furthering economic development and ensuring autonomy, especially in relation to the United States. Its own region was often little more than an afterthought to these broader considerations.

Only with the arrival of Fernando Henrique Cardoso as President in 1995, followed by President Lula, did Brazil assume a more proactive foreign policy posture. Trying to engage across the world and to reform the international political architecture, Brazil was also at the forefront of promoting regional cooperation in South America for both political and economic purposes.

Little of this activism survives today and some of its achievements are crumbling. Mired in a domestic political and economic crisis, the country has been largely absent from the international stage. At the same time, regional cooperation has essentially come to a halt. This is both regrettable and dangerous, bearing in mind the multiple challenges faced within the region. Brazilian leadership is urgently needed to navigate these challenges and could make a significant and positive contribution to solving the various problems confronted.

This article aims to answer three questions: What factors explain this breakdown of foreign policy activism by Brazil over the last few years? What does this breakdown mean for both Brazil as it engages with the world and, more importantly, in South America? What can be done to overcome this inertia?

To answer these questions, the article will use Complexity and Human Systems Dynamics as a conceptual framework to reinterpret mainly existing scholarship, arguing that this approach offers a set of fresh perspectives which will enable analysts and foreign policy makers to address the problems many of them have themselves identified. The current situation in Venezuela will serve as an illustrative case study. Out of this case study, some original conclusions will be drawn on the possible actions to address the problems identified. Areas for further research will also be outlined.

### **Brazilian Foreign Policy in Perspective: A Brief History**

Brazilian foreign policy has, historically, been marked by a great deal of continuity. In broad terms, one can identify the following principles: First, there has been a search for autonomy (Saraiva 2014). Fonseca (1998, p. 368) defines this concept as ‘a desire to influence the open agenda with values that translate diplomatic tradition and capacity to see the international order with one’s own eyes and fresh perspectives.’

A second key theme has been the idea of using foreign policy as a tool for national development. Lafer (2001, p. 108) describes this as ‘the objective par excellence of [Brazilian] foreign policy, as a public policy devoted to translating domestic necessities into external possibilities.’ In this sense ‘development [is] a means to reduc[e] the power asymmetries that were responsible for South American vulnerability’ (*ibid*, p. 81), making clear the link between the need for development and the quest for autonomy.

A third principle is the desire to be recognized. Lima (2005, p. 6) argues that 'this aspiration turns into foreign policy's very reason for [being].' She traces this desire back to the late 19th century when Brazil joined multiple international agreements and organizations in various policy spheres. The fear of being marginalized manifested itself even more strongly at the start of the 20th century, when Brazil made a point of participating in the Hague conference of 1907 and the Paris peace conference of 1919 in the aftermath of the First World War. On both of these occasions, the country argued strongly for the equality of states and against the distinction between 'great' and 'other' powers (Lafer 2005, pp. 68-74).

These principles have survived as guides for Brazilian foreign policy ever since. Yet, how these principles have been interpreted and translated into action has changed significantly.

To get a sense of this evolution, one only has to look at the meaning of the term 'autonomy' in Brazilian foreign policy. For many years, especially during the Cold War, autonomy essentially meant the country keeping its distance from, and therefore keeping out of, the superpower disputes of that time. Only with the end of Brazil's military dictatorship in 1985 and the subsequent end of the Cold War in 1989/90 did Brazil slowly begin to adopt a posture of 'autonomy through participation' (Fonseca Jr. 1998, p. 374). Brazil also started to promote specific values, such as democracy, 'a positive attitude in relation to human rights, social justice, search for peace [and] non-proliferation' (*ibid*, p. 374). These were seen as crucial preconditions to be able to participate fully within the international system in a post-Cold War world which witnessed the expansion of democracy and the supposed 'victory' of the liberal capitalist order at the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992).

These strategic considerations were taken further by the governments led by Presidents Cardoso and Lula. Both not only wanted Brazil to actively participate in the international political system but integrate with it. This phase of 'autonomy through integration' has been seen as the high point of Brazilian activism in foreign policy, which manifested itself in a renewed push for reform of the UN Security Council, active political engagement with the broadly defined 'global south', the push for the creation of new, and the deepening of old, international mechanisms of cooperation, such as the G20 or the BRICS grouping of developing countries (de Almeida 2009). Brazil, then, became an active promoter of international cooperation, regional integration and a keen advocate for profound reform of the international political system.

This change had a significant impact on Brazil's relationship with its own region, South America. Here, since the early 1990s, Brazil led a series of initiatives, creating an 'alphabet soup' of regional- and sub-regional organizations with a wide

range of responsibilities across a wide array of policy areas (Glickhouse 2012). The creation of organizations such as MERCOSUR, the Common Market of the Southern Cone, was a reflection of Brazil's desire to promote the region as well as manifest its own leadership credentials (Sweig 2010; Rothkopf 2012). It was also a reflection of an emerging consensus across the political spectrum about the kind of economic and political model to follow, inspired by the success of, in particular, the European Single Market. This consensus centred on a belief in free trade and the benefits of opening Brazil up to the wider world. In the region this meant a move away from 'closed' towards 'open' regionalism and a belief in the utility of regionalism as a tool for advancing particular national interests. This consensus was shared, broadly speaking, across the region and benefited greatly from the geopolitical stability of South America (Malamud 2010).

Yet, little of this activism survives today. In fact, many commentators have argued that Brazil is currently in headlong retreat from the international stage (Stuenkel 2014). The country has made deliberate choices, for instance, to disengage from key international forums on security (*ibid*). This disengagement is also reflected in the closing of embassies and consular representations across the globe, as well as other cut backs at the Foreign Ministry, Itamaraty (Stuenkel 2016). As a consequence, many of the initiatives started by Brazil in recent times lie moribond or abandoned. For instance, MERCOSUR is essentially paralyzed, reflecting a broader trend of the abandonment of regionalism as a foreign policy tool (Malamud 2012). With this, Brazil's push for profound reforms of the international political architecture has come to a halt without showing durable results (Malamud 2017).

Commentators have put forward a series of arguments to explain this situation. Some point to the country's internal political and economic problems as an explanation for its passive posture (Stuenkel 2016). Others point to former President's Dilma's relative lack of interest in foreign affairs, in sharp contrast to her two immediate predecessors (Zanini 2014). Yet others, however, looking at the more strategic level, point out that, even during its period of activism, Brazil's foreign policy was always hampered by what some have called 'ambiguities' and 'strategic confusion' (Hurrel 2008; Gardini 2015).

These arguments have considerable merit in explaining current Brazilian foreign policy inertia. In what follows I accept these arguments but interpret them through a new and innovative conceptual framework to explain this inertia: Complexity and Human Systems Dynamics. This framework will then be used to outline some tentative suggestions for action to overcome the problems identified. This is crucial since, whether it is the political and economic crisis in Venezuela, the repercussions of the peace process in Colombia or the impact of the Trump-presidency in the United States, the very near future is likely to present Brazil,

and South America, with formidable challenges which will require clear policies and effective leadership.

### **Foreign Policy as a Complex Adaptive System**

Whilst many have acknowledged the multiple problems currently faced by Brazil, in these debates the nature of these problems have often been defined as complicated. As Edwards (2002, p. 17) points out, with complicated problems 'it is possible to work out solutions and implement them.' Therefore, UN Security Council reform is complicated and will require a lot of effort. Reforming the international political architecture is complicated and will require a lot of effort and negotiations. Dealing with the Venezuelan crisis is complicated and will require a lot of effort.

However, as Lehmann (2012) or Geyer & Rihani (2010) have shown international politics and, by extension, foreign policy, are not complicated but complex issues, marked by the following characteristics:

- The presence within the system of a large number of elements
- These elements interact in a rich manner, that is, any element in the system is influenced by, and influences, a large number of other elements
- These interactions are often non-linear
- There are feedback loops in the interaction
- The system and its elements are open to their environment
- These systems operate in a state far from equilibrium
- These systems have a history
- The elements of the system are ignorant of the behavior of the system as a whole

In the words of Dooley (1997), this describes a Complex Adaptive System, defined as 'a collection of semi-autonomous agents with the freedom to act in unpredictable ways and whose interactions over time and space generate system-wide patterns.' As Edwards (2002, p. 17) has observed, such systems 'have remarkable resilience in the face of efforts to change them.' This is partly due to the fact that the system's agents 'are constantly changing, as are the relationships between and amongst them' (Eoyang & Holladay, 2013, p. 16-17). As a consequence, 'uncertainty becomes the rule' (*ibid*: 17).

Yet, uncertainty does not mean permanent instability. In fact, in most cases,



changes in the relationship between agents take place within a framework of fundamental systemic stability. As Eoyang and Holladay (2013, p. 17) put it, interactions ‘simply change the conditions and relationships among the parts and the whole; they do not change the system in any fundamental way.’ The interaction between parts and the whole often sustains existing patterns as ‘parts interact to generate emergent patterns while the patterns influence parts and their interactions. The result is a self-generating, self-organizing reality of human systems dynamics’ (*ibid*, p. 18), based on the interdependence between the parts and the whole of the system. Self-organization here is defined as a process by which the internal interactions between agents and conditions of a system generate system-wide patterns (Eoyang 2001).

In such a situation change is dynamical, the result of multiple forces acting in unpredictable ways and generating surprising outcomes which even the most powerful actors cannot control entirely. Change, then, is only partially predictable and characterized by what Malcolm Gladwell (2000) calls ‘tipping points’ at which the dynamics of the system change profoundly to settle into a new pattern. In such a situation, even if an action could be executed as planned, it would not guarantee the ‘right’ result. As elements of a CAS are multiple and interdependent, ‘one can never do only one thing’ since one action will have multiple impacts and ‘unintended consequences abound’ (Jervis 1997). That means that the self-organization of a Complex Adaptive System does not stop at a particular, less so at an externally predetermined, point. Instead ‘the best you can hope to do is to build adaptive capacity to coevolve with the system as it changes over time’ (Eoyang & Holladay 2013, p. 25).

Consequently, actions have to be constantly evaluated and adjusted depending on particular local circumstances. Decision-making processes have to be flexible and decentralized. They have to be able to respond and adapt to unforeseen circumstances as agents of the system respond and adapt to any given policy.

To do so, Eoyang and Holladay (2013) developed a process they call ‘Adaptive Action’, a ‘method for engaging in dynamical change in an ever-emerging, always self-organizing world’. They argue that it is necessary to approach any given problem with the aim of identifying the current state of self-organization to allow for targeted intervention that can change the pattern of self-organization which has given rise to, and sustains, the problem to be tackled. This process is based on three simple questions:

### ***What?***

The ‘what’ question tries to identify the current state of the process of self-organization, which, according to Eoyang (2001), is dependent on three conditions: elements which hold the system together (such as shared objectives, geographical

locations, social class etc.), differences between the agents of the system which generate tensions that allow for change (such as different interpretations of a particular issue, class, resources, location etc.) and channels through which these differences can be expressed (media, assemblies, meetings etc.). Eoyang (*ibid.*) calls these conditions ‘Containers’, ‘Differences’ and ‘Exchanges’. She also shows that these conditions are interdependent and influence each other across time and space and can serve different functions within different particular contexts. A particular condition can serve as a container in one context but a significant difference or an exchange in a different context.

Questions that might be asked to reveal the current state of self-organization include: What do we see? What containers are the most relevant? What differences exist and what impact do they have? What exchanges are strongest and what are the weakest etc.?

#### ***So what (does it mean)?***

The ‘so, what’ question tries to make sense of what has been observed. What do the patterns we observe mean for any possibility of action? Such a question is critical in that it generates options for action but also allows for the adaptation of action to different circumstances across time and space. Questions might include: So what does the current state mean to you, to me and to others? So what does that mean for our ability to act? So what does that mean for the future development of the system?

#### ***Now what (do we do)?***

The ‘now what’ question, finally, allows for the taking of action having considered the current state of self-organization and its implications across time and space. Questions may include: Now what will I/you/we/they do? Now what will be communicated to others? Now what will the results and the consequences be?

These three questions allow exercising ‘[c]onscious influence over self-organizing patterns [as it permits] seeing, understanding, and influencing the conditions that shape change in complex adaptive systems’ (Eoyang & Holladay, 2013, p. 30). Therefore, they allow for the identification of the conditions and patterns that give rise to, and sustain, particular problems, as well as actions to address this problem. As such, it will be useful to define more precisely what we mean by conditions and patterns.

#### ***Conditions***

Conditions are the elements of the social system which, individually and in interaction with one another, determine the speed, direction, and path of a social system as it evolves (i.e. self-organises) into the future. In other words, conditions



and their interactions are critical to the outcome of any process of self-organization.

### ***Patterns***

Patterns are the expression of the interaction between the three different conditions outlined above and are understood as ‘the similarities, differences and connections that have meaning across time and space’ (Eoyang & Holladay 2013, p. 42).

These terms have critical implications for action. They suggest that problems of the type currently being faced by Brazilian foreign policy-makers are, in fact, the expression of a pattern of interdependent conditions across time and space. Therefore, what need to change are the conditions which form these patterns.

### **The Decline of Brazilian Foreign Policy from a Complexity Perspective**

As mentioned above, one can detect some overriding principles which have historically guided the country in its dealings with the world. In the context of HSD and Complexity, these principles serve as containers which bound the system. As times changed – the end of the military dictatorship, the end of the Cold War, the changing paradigms of international economics from the 1990s onwards, the change of governments in Brazil etc. – so did the interpretations of these principles, as was outlined above. Yet, the principles itself remained largely in place. This allowed different governments to adapt foreign policy to the particular circumstances they found themselves in. In other words, whilst the container remains in place, different particular conditions – brought about by gateway events or other changes – led to different interpretations of these principles which, in turn, led to practical changes in foreign policy-making.

Presidents, as leaders, are crucial in articulating these interpretations and, therefore, serving as exchanges for the interaction between different conditions and actors that inhabit this system and try to shape it. In fact, they are themselves critical conditions. In recent times, perhaps no two Brazilian leaders have taken on this role as articulator of Brazilian foreign policy more clearly and determinedly than Presidents Cardoso and Lula, who governed Brazil from 1995-2010. Both managed, in their own distinct styles, to translate long-standing principles of Brazilian foreign policy into practical policies for their respective circumstances.

In both cases, ‘engagement’ served as a key container for the overall foreign policy direction. The multiple regional initiatives, the renewed push for a reform of the international political system, the opening up of Brazil to international trade or the enormous efforts that were made to foster cooperation with the so-called ‘global south’ are all testament to this principle (Altemani & Lessa 2008).

Crucially, the idea that Brazil should *lead* these efforts was also a common denominator. This is particularly true for efforts to foster regionalism, as shown by attempts to further MERCOSUR or the founding of UNASUR, which was the result of a Brazilian initiative at the start of the 2000s (Gratius & Saraiva, 2013). Yet, Brazilian leadership extended beyond the region. The BRICS initiative or the close engagement which Lula, in particular, sought with African countries, are also testament to this leadership. In fact, Brazil became an active, if not always effective, actor in both regional and international crisis diplomacy, as was the case after the Honduran military coup of 2009 or the Iran nuclear deal pushed by Brazil and Turkey in 2010 (Council of Foreign Relations 2010).

This is not to say that there were no differences either domestically or internationally. Domestically, it seems clear that the emphasis by Cardoso was more on economic development whilst, for Lula, it was more political and making Brazil heard in the world, although these two objectives obviously overlap (Altemani & Lessa 2008). In fact, and this will become crucial in the later discussion of the current crisis, both used important economic actors, such as Odebrecht, Petrobras or the national development bank BNDES, to underscore their foreign policy objectives, giving those actors key roles in executing a variety of infrastructure projects both in Latin America and Africa that also advanced Brazilian economic and political interests internationally (Malamud 2017). Equally, Brazil's push for a greater role oftentimes met with considerable pushback, as was clearly shown in relation to the above-mentioned cases of Honduras and Iran (Washington Post 2010).

Hence, the different emphasis by the two leaders was contained enough and could be channelled through exchanges (or connections) that ensure the movement of information and energy. Here, the strategy of engagement pursued by both Cardoso and Lula was vital because it allowed for the establishment of many connections both at regional and global level, be it through new regional organizations, be it through the G20 grouping or the BRICS or be it through the fact that Lula, in particular, opened a great number of Brazilian embassies across the world so that there always *were* connections, and the possibility of exchange, across time and space (Stuenkel 2014). It may be useful here to put this visually.

**Table 1:** Cardoso/Lula Foreign Policy as a Coherent Process of Self-Organization

Conditions for Self-Organization	Conditions Present
Container	Autonomy through integration and participation
Difference	Different leadership styles Different priorities in pursuing engagement
Exchange	Presidential leadership and pronouncements Regional and global forums (Increasing number of) diplomatic missions
Pattern	Coherent

As a consequence, Brazilian foreign policy was both coherent – here defined as the degree to which parts of a system “fit” each other or the external environment, and it is a necessary factor in sustainability – and effective, to the extent that several analysts attested to the arrival of Brazil on the world stage (Rothkopf 2012). The Economist (2009b) even proclaimed on its front page that ‘Brazil takes off’. Relevant to the current debate, this coherence survived several political and economic challenges, such as high inflation confronted by Cardoso, the economic crisis of 2008 confronted by Lula or the various regional political crises that both confronted during their combined 16 years in power, including political instability in Venezuela and Central America. In other words, there was enough resilience in the system to weather these challenges.

In what follows it will be argued that the reason Brazil no longer has this resilience in the face of unfavourable circumstances is due to a change of conditions domestically which have meant a loss of coherence and an associated inability to effectively influence external events.

The first of these conditions was the change of President. Quite independently of the economic crisis through which Brazil is passing now Dilma took over the country in 2011 with little interest in foreign policy and, subsequently, few international connections. Whilst hand-picked by Lula as his successor, she had, for years, been his domestic ‘fixer’ and had far more interest in domestic affairs (Muggah 2015). As a consequence she did little to push forward the development of MERCOSUR or the BRICS or other initiatives. As Stuenkel (2014) pointed out, the retreat from the international stage by Brazil predated the economic and political crisis which ended up engulfing Dilma. A gateway event (the change of President), therefore, led to a clear change in a key condition: the container which had guided Brazilian foreign policy for many years.

This weakening commitment to engagement as a guiding principle of Brazilian foreign policy occurred at a time when the differences between Brazil and

its regional partners multiplied. In very simple terms, different regional governments pursued increasingly divergent policies both economically and in terms of engaging with the rest of the world. Lehmann (2013) identified three different groupings of countries with very different priorities and policy styles. This had significant consequences particularly for regional cooperation in South America which, as many commentators have pointed out, relies heavily on 'presidentialism' as a mechanism for action (Cheibub *et al.* 2011). Since Presidents were no longer coherent with regards to their foreign policy goals and approach, and with Dilma unable and unwilling to address this divergence, regional mechanisms have essentially fallen into a state of disrepair (Malamud & Gardini 2012).

Yet, this withering away of regional cooperation also took away one of the key conditions to reconcile increasingly divergent priorities and styles. South American countries have become increasingly inward-looking with many beset by their own internal crises (as will be shown below in the case of Venezuela) or with different political priorities as, for instance, in the case of Colombia which was negotiating a peace deal with the FARC to end its long-standing civil war.

The economic and political crisis faced by Brazil from around 2014 onwards became simply *one more* factor in explaining Brazil's declining interest in foreign policy, but it was in no way the starting point, nor the only factor. It was, however, crucial in three aspects: First, it *consolidated* this lack of interest in foreign policy institutionally as, in the name of austerity, cut-backs have been made to the budget of the Foreign Ministry, Itamaraty, and several diplomatic missions across the world have closed (Stuenkel 2016). As such, the decline of Brazil's leadership capacity has essentially been 'locked in' at institutional level for the foreseeable future.

Second, the economic and political crisis in Brazil has sharpened the ideological divide within the country and spilled onto the diplomatic stage, especially when it comes to Brazil's relationship with its own neighbourhood. This has become particularly evident in relation to Venezuela, as will be shown below.

Third, some of the very actors that were heavily promoted by Cardoso and Lula in their push for Brazilian insertion into the international arena are now involved in huge corruption scandals which are illustrative of the political and economic crisis through which Brazil is passing. Companies like Odebrecht or Petrobras are not only facing serious financial and political difficulties at home but also criminal investigations and reputational loss abroad. Having been key partners in Brazilian foreign policy, these scandals therefore have a direct impact on Brazil's ability to project itself abroad in a very practical sense: It impedes any possibility of the country using these companies to project itself as a benevolent benefactor to others, especially in the sphere of financing infrastructure projects or fostering

other aspects of south-south cooperation both in a practical or normative way. Key players executing this strategy are sitting in jail whilst confidence and trust in the motives of the Brazilian government have evaporated (Mares & Trinkunas 2016; Santoro 2017).

It is worth, once again, illustrating this change graphically.

**Table 2: Current Brazilian Foreign Policy as a Process of Self-Organization**

Conditions for Self-Organization	Conditions Present
Container	Presidential priorities Austerity
Difference	Divergent regional foreign policy priorities Economic circumstances nationally and regionally Changing and diverging economic policies
Exchange	Presidentialism Domestic audiences (Declining number of) Diplomatic missions
Pattern	Incoherent

What this demonstrates is an increasingly incoherent self-organizing process which is constantly being amplified by self-reinforcing feedback loops. Preoccupied with its own domestic crises Brazil has demonstrated a lack of leadership *capacity* to bring these various different interests (back) together. With the erosion of the container which used to hold the system together and the increasing number of differences both internally and externally, the system simply cannot cope with the tensions that are being generated. The consequence is an inability to act effectively. What this means in practice will now be demonstrated by looking in a little more detail at the political crisis in Venezuela and Brazil's efforts to lead attempts to solve it. It will show an incoherent process of self-organization in action.

### **What Does it Mean? The Case of Venezuela as an Example of Incoherence in Action**

Venezuela has been on what seems like a death spiral for many years and many observers argue that some kind of internal implosion or even conflict can no longer be ruled out. As one Venezuelan opposition politician put it in an interview: 'There may well be some kind of conflict' (Interview with Venezuelan opposition politician 2015). A Colombian journalist argued that the great danger for the region stems from the fact that 'we do not know what's going on inside the country. We do not understand it and have no influence over it' (Interview Colombian journalist 2014).

With the country suffering the highest inflation in the world, a crime wave of unprecedented proportions, severe shortages of food and other basic necessities and a dysfunctional relationship between the national Congress and the Executive, as well as tensions at street level between supporters and opponents of President Maduro and his 'Chavista' government that have been rising steadily for years, the situation seems both dangerous and intractable and whose consequences are already being felt through the region. There are both practical concerns, for instance about the rising number of Venezuelans trying to flee the country which has a direct impact on some of Brazil's poorest regions (Estado de São Paulo 2017), as well as political/strategic concerns about how to deal with Venezuela and its governments within the various existing regional frameworks (Merke *et al.* 2016).

In many ways, the crisis would have been 'made' for Brazil to exercise its leadership. Brazil was instrumental in setting up regional mechanisms to address precisely this kind of crisis. UNASUR, founded by 12 member states in 2008 after an initiative by then- Brazilian President Lula, was intended to 'developing cooperative mechanisms to resolve [various...] security challenges', ranging from drug trafficking, extraordinary levels of violent crime, to occasional political instability in a number of countries (Pothuraju 2012, p. 2). The idea was to provide a structure through which common challenges could be discussed and resolved (Briceño Ruiz 2010). Over the years, these challenges have included the question of how to preserve the democratic order and stability in the region (Heine and Weiffen 2015). This being the case it should come as no great surprise that, as the crisis in Venezuela got progressively worse and protracted, it was UNASUR which offered itself as the mechanism through which some kind of mediation process between government and opposition could be managed. This offer of mediation was first made in 2014 (O Globo 2014).

Yet, so far at least, these mediation efforts have come to, at best, very little and here the role played by Brazil, and its lack of leadership, is crucial. On the one hand, there has never been unequivocal agreement between all member-states about what the role of UNASUR should be, reflecting one of the main historic differences between South American countries: the main purpose of regionalism. Whilst, for some, regionalism is seen as a way to cooperate, for others it has always been an instrument to protect against outside interference in domestic affairs, albeit that, historically, most of this interference came from the United States (Keller 2013). In fact, UNASUR has sometimes been seen as an organization whose primary purpose is to underline and strengthen the autonomy of the region vis-à-vis outside intervention. Brazil has never resolved this glaring tension in relation to the organization (The Economist, 2009a). Nevertheless, one can say with confidence that sovereignty in South America serves as an enormously strong container for some countries, with obvious consequences for



the development of regionalism. As such, commitment to a regionally-sponsored solution to the Venezuelan crisis has never been unequivocal as it is, essentially, a domestic problem.

At the same time Brazil's position in relation to Venezuela has also been influenced strongly by domestic factors. Under Lula and Dilma, the country's posture to Venezuela was, according to some commentators too supportive of Chavez and his successor (Bandeira 2016). This shifted significantly when Michel Temer assumed the presidency in 2016. The government, under the then-Foreign Minister José Serra, began to publicly criticize Venezuela and assume a clear posture in favour of punishing the country for breaking the democracy clause. This facilitated, amongst other things, the suspension of Venezuela from MERCOSUR (El Nacional, 2016).

Yet, in the sense of influencing the conditions which have led to and sustained the current pattern – and therefore the crisis- in Venezuela these moves have not significantly altered these conditions. In fact, it can be argued that, in some ways, this change of posture has made the situation more intractable. The reasons for this can be found in both the domestic Venezuelan situation and the regional considerations.

In Venezuela, the changes in Brazil have merely fortified the respective containers of the government and opposition whilst deepening the divisions between them internally. As a result, there has been a complete breakdown of common endeavour between supporters and opponents of the government of Nicholas Maduro, who define each other in almost exclusively adversarial terms, as a series of interviews the author undertook in Venezuela in 2015 made clear.<sup>1</sup> There is, therefore, no container around which the basis of a mutually acceptable dialogue between the two sides can be constructed.

This being the case, the lack of knowledge and access by the rest of the region about and to Venezuela weighs heavily. Both sides in the Venezuelan conflict see outside actors exclusively through their own prism of being either for or against them. The suspension of Venezuela from MERCOSUR, in this respect, plays into the view held by the Venezuelan government that there is a conspiracy against the country which sees itself surrounded by hostile forces (Carey 2015). The change of posture by Brazil over the last year underscores this point. Almost logically, no mediation attempt undertaken by UNASUR has been able to overcome this debilitating difference. In other words, it has not been possible to establish a container or an exchange within which these differences can be expressed in such a way as to influence the incoherent pattern in a desired manner. Here, the lack of

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<sup>1</sup> These interviews were held 'on background' in December 2015 with actors both supportive and critical of the current government.

institutional capacity on the part of UNASUR weighs heavily. The organization does not seem to have the structures and institutions necessary to act as a neutral arbiter, nor the capacity to project itself in such a way as to be *seen* as such an actor by both sides in the conflict.

At the same time, in assuming such an uncompromising position, the Brazilian government has exacerbated different perceptions of the crisis throughout the region. As mentioned above, there is now a regional problem of refugees from Venezuela in which Brazil is involved in a practical sense. However, other countries, such as Colombia feel the impact of the crisis on a much larger scale with tensions between the two countries running extremely high, leading to the closure of the shared border and serious problems in border communities in relation to the smuggling of goods and the attempts by Venezuelans to acquire basic necessities across the border in much larger numbers than has been the case in Brazil (The Guardian 2016). As such, any escalation of the rhetoric is seen with great concern by Colombia since the fall-out from it will be felt much more immediately by that country.

Taking these factors together one can see an extremely incoherent process of self-organization which it is worth visualizing for clarity.

**Table 3:** Response to the Crisis in Venezuela as a Process of Self-Organization

Conditions for Self-Organization	Conditions Present
<b>Container</b>	Pro-government Pro-opposition Impact on 'my' (neighbouring) country
<b>Difference</b>	Objectives of any political action Differences in impact Problem definition Preferred forum for problem resolution
<b>Exchange</b>	Respective national media Respective government pronouncements (Weakening) regional institutions Bi-lateral meetings with government or opposition
<b>Pattern</b>	Incoherent

What one has, then, is a process where multiple, and often contradictory, containers are not strong enough to hold the multiple and, recently, increasing differences that inhabit the system. These differences can be found across all levels of the system, from the local to the national to the regional. This in turn means that actions cannot be scaled across the system as a whole, making it highly unlikely, at best, that any actions could be effective. Brazil actively contributes to this inco-

herence by assuming such an uncompromising position in relation to Venezuela at the same time as it has essentially abdicated as a serious foreign policy actor in virtually all other questions. That means that, on the one hand, it is not seen as a 'neutral' actor in which both sides in the Venezuelan crisis have a minimum of confidence whilst not being able and willing to invest time and effort to make UNASUR into a central forum for the resolution of this, and this type, of conflict. The result is ineffective diplomacy and drift. There is no consensus about the role UNASUR could, or should, play in addressing the crisis, nor, consequently, about what to do to *make* the organization an effective actor in this respect. Brazil provides no leadership in order to address this question nor does there seem to be any particular demand on the part of many other countries that Brazil assume such a role.

As a consequence, there are also no effective exchanges through which the differences indicated above could be aired in such a way as to allow for change in a reasonably coherent and effective manner. The incoherence of the process of self-organization therefore becomes self-sustaining.

The question, then, is what can be done.

### **Now What?**

Acting in self-organizing Complex Adaptive Systems is, in principle, straightforward. All one has to do is to change the conditions which give rise to the pattern which gives rise to and sustain the problem one is seeking to address. Therefore, for Brazil, the problem is not that it cannot lead, just as in Venezuela the problem is not that government and opposition do not trust each other and, therefore, cannot work together. The problem is the conditions which give rise to this lack of leadership or mistrust.

Therefore, the key is to identify the conditions that can be changed and over which Brazil, in our case, *would have influence*. This last bit is crucial since it makes absolutely no sense to try and influence conditions that are beyond the capacity of any particular actor. This being the case, the first thing Brazil can do is looking at itself. As the above has shown, the country itself currently suffers from an extremely incoherent foreign policy process fuelled, but not started, by an economic and political crisis which makes long-term strategic planning extremely difficult. Therefore, some key questions Brazil should ask itself in its foreign policy debate are: What conditions cause the incoherence in our foreign policy? What are our foreign policy priorities? How might different actors interpret these priorities? What does this mean for foreign policy action? What common ground can we find between different actors in terms of priorities and actions?

A debate on such questions is critical since it can strengthen the containers

around which foreign policy is made whilst allowing the tensions generated by the differences identified to be used constructively. In order to do this, however, one practical action that could be taken is to increase the exchanges through which these differences can be aired. It would, in this respect, be useful if the space given over to foreign policy in the media, in Congress and other forums – political and in civil society – was to be increased. Here the current economic crisis might actually be helpful in the sense that it would allow a return to a historic principle of Brazilian foreign policy: that of development. Whilst there would be disagreements on the exact ways and means through which development could be furthered through foreign policy, the principle that foreign policy should be used to improve the living standards for the population at large would surely be uncontroversial, if not particularly ambitious.

Only having resolved the basic principles of Brazilian foreign policy going forward, can Brazil hope to leave behind its foreign policy inertia since it will then be possible to once again engage with the outside world with a clear objective to pursue. This, in consequence, would also enable the country to once again engage constructively in the region, be it through MERCOSUR, UNASUR or bilaterally and assume a leadership role. Here also, the key is the critical *questions* that need to be asked: What are the priorities that all member states can agree on? What are the principle issues to be tackled at regional level for Brazil and for others? How would Brazil, and how would others, define the most important challenges for the region? What common ground can be established? What instruments could and should be used to address these common challenges?

Such questions are particularly important in the light of the current political and economic crisis in Brazil since it is these crises which have significantly altered the conditions within which Brazil can act. In simple terms, as shown above, many of the actors that were key partners of the government to promote and execute Brazilian foreign engagement during the Cardoso and Lula years are not only no longer available (since they are in jail or investigated criminally) but have seriously undercut the normative aspect of the approach followed by Cardoso and Lula. As a consequence, not only is Brazil not offering leadership, there is also very little *demand* for it on the part of other countries.

From this perspective, then, the most important thing is to change the conditions that lead to, and sustain, the current dysfunctional pattern. That means, above all, asking different types of questions to see where and how the conditions can be identified and influenced. This, in turn, will have significant implications for practical foreign policy action.

In relation to the case study of Venezuela, such a reconceptualization has critical consequences. First of all, approaching the country with questions, rather than

answers ('Maduro must go', for instance), might allow for more meaningful engagement. Approaching the country with the aim of focussing, for example, on the economy and preventing a humanitarian catastrophe ('What can be done to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe?', as one example) is far more neutral and might enable the construction of a consensus than to 'take sides'. It would also be critical, in this respect, to take any dialogue out of a setting (a geographical or political container) that may be construed as being biased. In this sense, recent attempts by the Catholic Church to broker a dialogue might be more promising in the medium-term. Asking the type of questions indicated above will also focus minds on what or who can realistically be changed. Since Maduro has given no indication that he will change his approach in any significant way, for instance, but since it is known that there are divisions within the government on how to handle the crisis, focus on these divisions in any action and concentrate on those actors that have shown willingness, albeit slight, to adapt and engage (Caselli 2013). In practical actions, focus on changing the conditions on the ground by helping, as far as possible, the population regardless of political beliefs in order to demonstrate the benefits of engagement. In other words, take the action out of the political arena where the pattern which sustains the political and social division in the country is so entrenched. Due to its influence, size and resources, Brazil could play a critical role in managing and developing these efforts.

A second, related, approach could be to focus on improving the institutional capacity of UNASUR to develop and deliver such practical humanitarian policies. Key questions would include what needs to be done to allow UNASUR to become an effective humanitarian actor to address the consequences of the Venezuelan crisis? Whilst such a focus would represent a significant departure for UNASUR politically, it would, at the same time, narrow in on something that member-states may more easily be able to agree on and, as a consequence, give new vitality to the group, especially if it were to be successful in alleviating the most dire consequences of the current humanitarian crisis. Such success, in turn, would change the dynamic within the group and build up its political capital. In other words, the conditions within which it is acting would change, allowing for a change of pattern and therefore open up the *possibility* of change. From a Brazilian point of view, it would also be a focus which could command consensus domestically.

Whilst the outcome of such changes would be uncertain, such a focus would, at the very least, *signal* change and a willingness to engage that may bring about a tipping point at which the system changes dramatically. It seems that worse than the current state is hardly possible.

## Conclusion

In answering the question in the title of this article – Can Brazil lead? – the conclusion has to be that, at this moment in time, the country is unable to lead, at least in any effective and coherent sense. Yet, the purpose of this article was to show that this inability to lead is *not* the result of particular events like the economic crisis. Rather, Brazil's retreat from the international stage, and its subsequent inability to lead its own region, is the consequence of an incoherent pattern of conditions to which the economic crisis contributed but did not start. Using Complexity and Human System Dynamics, it was argued that the key to re-assuming a leadership position and, as a result, be able to deal with important issues right on the country's doorstep, such as Venezuela, is to ask the right question to identify the conditions that form and sustain the pattern of incoherence which marks Brazilian foreign policy at the moment. That requires action both at the national, as well as the regional level. The actions proposed, like the broadening of the exchanges or a thorough debate about what should be the Brazilian foreign policy container, are obviously only sketched out very briefly here. How these ideas can be put into practice and be scaled across a giant system like the Brazilian foreign policy establishment, and those actors linked to it, will require a lot more work and research.

Yet, I hope to have shown that such work is urgent since the *absence* of Brazilian leadership has done nothing to stabilize the region or give it a greater and more coherent voice in the world. Even in a Complex Adaptive System, which is marked by uncertainty and unpredictability, leadership is a crucial element. The question is, therefore, not if one needs leadership but what one is leading for and towards. That is the question Brazil has to answer urgently.

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